

# ISIS'S MILITARY OPERATIONS DURING RAMADAN: A FORECAST FOR 2015

*The purpose of this intelligence forecast is to outline ISW's assessment of the most likely and most dangerous courses of action for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to pursue during Ramadan (June 17, 2015 to July 17, 2015). For the past three years, ISIS has conducted major offensive operations during the Ramadan holy month, accomplishing its major annual campaign objectives. Its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), had historically also elevated violence in Iraq during Ramadan. ISIS is therefore likely preparing a surge of operations to try to achieve important campaign objectives. ISIS can also be expected to commemorate its declaration of a Caliphate on the first full day of Ramadan 2014 by trying to build upon or surpass its declaration of the caliphate last year. ISIS could do so by accomplishing new military objectives, striking religious targets, or announcing a new political milestone. Regardless, ISIS is likely to begin and end Ramadan with attempted spectacular military offensive actions in Iraq and Syria.*

## ANNIVERSARY OF THE DECLARATION OF THE ISIS CALIPHATE

The beginning of Ramadan 2015 marks the first anniversary of ISIS's caliphate, which it declared following the fall of Mosul on June 10 and numerous subsequent military victories in Iraq. ISIS will likely try to mark the anniversary by building upon or surpassing its declaration of the caliphate last year. ISIS could do so by accomplishing new military objectives, striking religious targets, or announcing a new political milestone.

ISIS's actions during Ramadan 2015 will be aimed at amplifying its strategic messaging. These messages may highlight one of several discrete objectives: that the caliphate remains (which theme ISIS has already stated and achieved); that the caliphate is a legitimate successor to those of old and has a new capital to prove it; that sectarian and religious war is accelerating and that all Muslims must mobilize; and that ISIS is expanding militarily.

### **1. The caliphate remains.**

No ground force has successfully challenged the whole of ISIS's physical territory. ISIS is likely to emphasize that its claim to the caliphate stands because it does

not face an existential threat. In fact, it has expanded territorially and in terms of its followers. It is possible that ISIS does not need to demonstrate a greater accomplishment before Ramadan, and instead will simply boast of this achievement. Numerous ISIS public statements emphasize that its strategic goal is "to remain and expand;" ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi spoke of the caliphate remaining as a major objective in his 2014 Ramadan speech. ISIS is likely to claim this phased victory loudly at the start of Ramadan. ISIS may attempt new military or spectacular attacks to underscore this message, but it is possible that ISIS will not conduct new attacks before Ramadan because it has already accomplished its stated objective to remain.

### **2. ISIS seizes a historic capital.**

ISIS's caliphate includes several great cities, particularly Mosul, from which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS declared the caliphate one year ago. ISIS may proclaim a capital there. There are, however, capitals of historic caliphates within ISIS's current reach inside Iraq and Syria. Specifically, ISIS may desire to claim Samarra, Baghdad, or Damascus, all capitals of previous caliphates. These cities are hardened targets that are protected by state militaries with significant Iranian augmentation, as well as other alliances.

ISIS's selection of these targets would presuppose the defeat of the militaries currently defending those cities or their redeployment to other objectives in ways that leave the capitals vulnerable. ISIS may therefore attempt to collapse the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Syrian Arab Army over the course of its 2015 campaign, possibly before Ramadan, though more likely over the course of 2015.

### 3. ISIS stokes regional sectarian or religious war.

ISIS may attempt to accelerate the regional sectarian war by targeting Shi'a religious holy sites with spectacular attacks, especially in Karbala, Najaf, and Samarra in Iraq. AQI's destruction of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra in February 2006 dramatically accelerated sectarian violence in Iraq. ISIS attempted to reach Samarra in its 2014 ground offensive and Karbala and Najaf in its terrorist campaign. As Ramadan is a religious holiday, pilgrims from all over Iraq go to the shrines, making them vulnerable to infiltration by ISIS. ISIS is also present in areas proximate to the shrine cities from which it could stage attacks. The ISF, Iran, and its proxies are likely to have to balance counteroffensive operations elsewhere in Iraq against these positions. ISIS will also likely target Shi'a populations outside of Iraq and Syria, particularly in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and possibly further abroad.

### 4. ISIS attacks to maintain its military momentum or to expand.

It is also possible that ISIS will designate its next military objectives in conjunction with Ramadan simply to consolidate its gains, expand its territory, or set conditions for its next annual campaign. Momentum is a critical component of ISIS's current campaign, though it essentially supports ISIS's defensive objective to remain in the face of many adversaries. ISIS may seek limited military objectives before or during Ramadan 2015 simply to maintain its momentum rather than launching new campaign objectives. Alternatively, ISIS may attack in order to begin a new phase of conquest and consolidation.

To determine which of these forecasted objectives ISIS may attempt, ISW used the traditional techniques of

intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). IPB is a process of analyzing enemy forces, terrain, weather, and civilian considerations in order to anticipate their effects upon friendly forces and their planned or ongoing operations. In the context of a known and cogent adversary, IPB involves analysis of the adversary's possible courses of action, given existing knowledge about the adversary's capabilities, tactics, and intent. Courses of action are ranked from most to least likely and evaluated for the dangers that they potentially pose to friendly force operations. The purpose of enemy course of action projection is to inform decision-makers with accurate forecasts that adequately account for a range of possibilities as well as the outside risk of most dangerous courses of action. Most dangerous courses of action are designated as such because they are not most likely, but they are nevertheless plausible. Illuminating them allows commanders to mitigate risk while planning in the context of most likely courses of action.

ISW has previously assessed the battlefields in which ISIS is engaged, including Iraq and Syria. It has also assessed ISIS's capabilities, limitations, disposition, and intent from the openly available sources. These assessments inform this product. The following scenarios will explore the most likely and most dangerous scenarios that ISIS could execute before and during Ramadan 2015 in pursuit of some or all of these strategic objectives. The scenarios consider ISIS's possible actions in Iraq, Syria, the Near Abroad (historical caliphate lands in the Middle East, North Africa, Caucasus, and Southwest Asia), and the Far Abroad. ISIS has spoken of and begun acting upon most of the concepts of operations described below.

## ISIS'S MOST LIKELY COURSE OF ACTION (MLCOA): MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO THROUGH RAMADAN 2015

ISIS's most likely course of action through the end of Ramadan 2015 is to continue its current military campaign in Iraq, Syria, and abroad, while claiming victory as an uncontested and expanding caliphate during its first year. ISIS's current campaign, which included major operations at Ramadi, Baiji, and Palmyra, allows ISIS to maintain momentum,

demonstrate that it has not been degraded by anti-ISIS efforts, claim a message of victory, and set conditions for future campaign phases. ISIS will likely make a formal announcement to this effect at the start or during Ramadan 2015. ISIS will also likely maximize its opportunities to dismantle competing militaries in Iraq and Syria to demonstrate that its caliphate will be unrivaled in the years to come. ISIS will likely continue to attempt to show the futility of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition and try to break its will to fight.

*Iraq Most Likely: Control the Euphrates River Valley, Consolidate Anbar, and Expand Elsewhere in Iraq*

ISIS approaches Ramadan 2015 having gained control of Ramadi, the provincial capital of Anbar and longstanding symbol of ISF resistance to ISIS in Sunni-held areas. Seizing Ramadi supported ISIS's operational objective of consolidating control of Anbar province, now obstructed in only three places: Haditha, al-Asad airbase, and Habaniya. ISIS is therefore likely vigorously to continue its Anbar consolidation before end of Ramadan 2015. Haditha is the last standing major urban area in Anbar that has yet to fall to ISIS. Seizing Haditha would also allow ISIS to control critical infrastructure, including the Haditha dam. Control of Haditha dam would give ISIS further ability to impose water shortages and create counter-mobility obstacles through flooding that disrupt and fix the ISF, Shi'a militias, and Sunni tribes. ISIS would thereby set conditions for future operations.

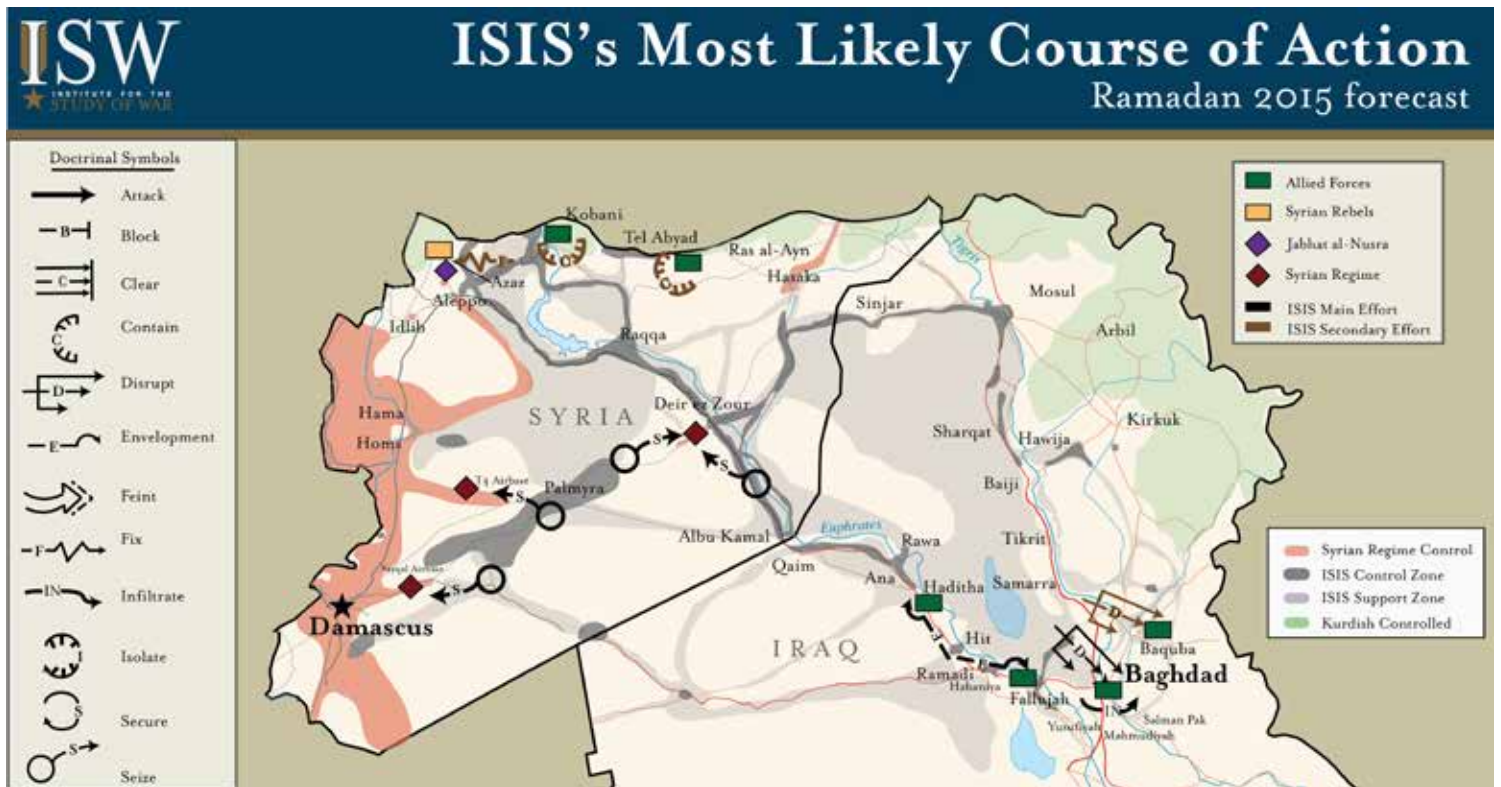
ISIS is also likely to target the Iraqi Security Forces' remaining strategic military positions in Anbar, particularly Habaniya. Seizing Habaniya and al-Asad airbase would essentially collapse the ISF and Sunni tribal resistance to ISIS in Anbar, completing ISIS's control of the province and the Euphrates in Iraq. Al-Asad is also significant as a political target because it is a base housing U.S. personnel. ISIS may target it, as it has in the past, in order to persuade the U.S.-led coalition to abandon its campaign in Iraq and Syria. Other limited military objectives that ISIS may pursue, such as attacking the Baghdad International Airport, Taji Base, Balad Airbase, or COB Speicher could potentially also generate this political effect.

ISIS may attack the bases generally, isolate them from reinforcement, or attempt to seize them through complex attacks, witnessed elsewhere in Iraq and Syria over the last two years. Targeting bases through terrorism and infiltration in order to collapse the will of the Iraqi Security Forces or create an insider opportunity is more likely than overrunning these hardened facilities through direct military means, such as complex attacks. This is a likely as well as most dangerous course of action for ISIS from a U.S. perspective.

ISIS may also expand dramatically before the end of Ramadan to achieve the best possible snapshot of territorial claims prior to the announcement of a new campaign phase. ISIS has the potential to expand further south of Baghdad into historic AQI support zones in Mahmudiyah, Yusufiyah, and Salman Pak. The Shi'a militias and the ISF have protected these zones since 2013, but they may not be as concentrated as in previous years because of competing priorities. Likewise, ISIS may seek to seize Diyala, specifically Baquba, which had previously housed the capital of AQI's preceding governorate, the Islamic State of Iraq. ISIS has available military resources in the Zaab triangle (the terrain bounded by Sharqat, Hawija, and Baiji) and may use them to expand near Kirkuk or to fix ISF and Shi'a militias at Baiji and Tikrit in support of an Anbar and Euphrates consolidation campaign phase.

*Syria Most Likely: ISIS Sets Conditions for Major Military Operations in Western Syria*

ISIS initiated a new phase of military operations in Syria on May 20, 2015 with the seizure of Palmyra and proximate military bases in eastern Homs Province. In doing so, ISIS transitioned from rear area operations in Syria to an offensive posture in preparation for major military expansion into western Syria. ISIS has likely already outlined a campaign plan for its Syrian theater. ISIS's strategic objective in Syria in this new phase is likely to expand its territorial control, break the Syrian Arab Army, and absorb large segments of Syria's armed opposition. ISIS will likely apply pressure to seams between distinct geographic fronts in Syria and within human networks in order to



unravel the stalemated conflict and create follow-on opportunities that it can exploit.

ISIS's most likely course of action in Syria in the 2015 Ramadan period is to undertake offensive action to secure the territorial integrity and functionality of its Caliphate lands in Syria and to position ISIS forces for future major expansive operations into the key terrain of the Syrian civil war. ISIS is likely to launch offensives to consolidate its control over central and eastern Syria and establish a firm and defensible western flank near Damascus. First, ISIS is likely to attack and attempt to seize two military bases west of Palmyra that could create a defensible western flank on the approach to Palmyra. The T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat military airbases represent vulnerable targets to ISIS, which is able to attack both facilities from more than one axis. In addition, ISIS is likely to capitalize on the opportunity to connect its swath of territorial control at Palmyra with ISIS-held Deir ez-Zour Province by eliminating remaining regime-held terrain on the western outskirts of Deir ez-Zour City. ISIS's seizure of Palmyra severed the regime's ground line of communication (GLOC) to Deir ez-Zour, constraining the regime to aerial resupply of now-surrounded regime forces west of Deir ez-Zour

city. The fall of Deir ez-Zour and the remaining cities in Anbar would give ISIS control of the Euphrates in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS will likely conduct two supporting efforts in order to succeed. ISIS is currently vulnerable at the Tel Abyad border crossing north of Raqqa City as a result of the close proximity of opposing Kurdish forces, the YPG. ISIS must disrupt an ongoing YPG-led offensive against Tel Abyad and then contain Syrian Kurdish YPG forces within pockets of YPG-held terrain surrounding the border towns of Kobani and Ras al-Ayn. ISIS is likely to disrupt the Tel Abyad offensive in Hasaka Province, where ISIS can escalate against YPG-held terrain while protecting the rear of its ongoing offensive near Palmyra. Ongoing ISIS attacks on Hasaka City already indicate that ISIS intends to disrupt the YPG in this manner. Second, ISIS will likely fix Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) forces north of Aleppo City in order to disrupt a planned JN and opposition offensive there. ISIS would likely attempt to thwart the Aleppo operation because it has not yet set the necessary conditions to exploit the destabilization of Aleppo city that the rebel offensive would accelerate. Ongoing ISIS attacks of critical JN and rebel-held terrain near



the border town of Azaz indicate that ISIS has this intent. Therefore, ISIS is likely already conducting the two supporting efforts that the Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA) main effort requires.

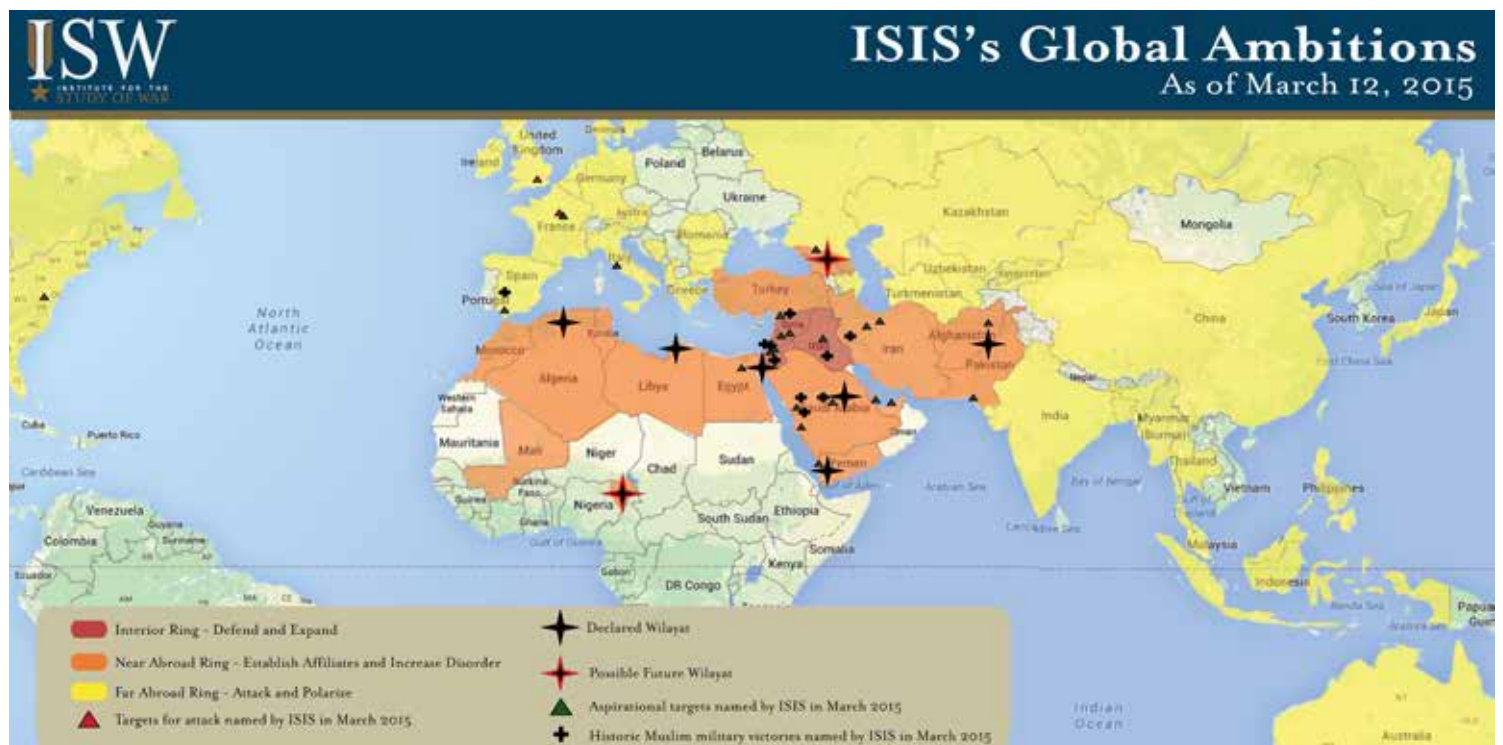
*Abroad Most Likely: Claim success along existing regional and international lines of effort*

Over the course of Ramadan 2015 ISIS will most likely continue its multi-pronged global campaign, which it initiated in June 2014. ISIS will likely capitalize on Ramadan and the one-year anniversary of the declaration of the caliphate as opportunities to demonstrate the global reach and lasting power of the organization. To do so ISIS will likely direct or encourage its regional affiliates and supporters to undertake spectacular action in the pursuit of their local campaign objectives. To achieve maximum effect, ISIS's leaders will likely encourage affiliates to plan actions clustered in time, perhaps on the anniversary of the caliphate declaration, so that they can be united in a common messaging framework.

In the Near Abroad, ISIS's affiliates will likely continue their campaigns to exacerbate local conflicts, recruit, and seize terrain. In Libya, ISIS's affiliates will likely seek to expand their territorial control, possibly using

the newly consolidated city of Sirte as a base. ISIS's Libyan affiliates will likely also expand social control in Sirte and Derna. ISIS's leadership within Iraq and Syria will likely capitalize upon these military and governance successes as an opportunity to emphasize the regional strength and spread of the organization. Within Egypt ISIS's Wilayat Sinai will likely also attempt to capitalize on existing unrest to recruit amongst the local population while launching large explosive attacks on security forces. ISIS's affiliates may attempt to administer governance or claim territorial control within the Sinai and Afghanistan, both as a means of proclaiming caliphate expansion and as a way to prepare for future military operations.

ISIS's affiliates within Saudi Arabia and Yemen are likely to exacerbate local conflicts by attacking Shi'a targets. In particular ISIS's Wilayat Najd in Saudi Arabia will likely attempt additional attacks on Shi'a mosques in order to increase tensions between the Saudi government and its Shi'a minority. ISIS's affiliates in Yemen may expand brutal attacks against al Houthi forces as a means of gaining support from local tribes and insurgent elements. Finally, ISIS's affiliates and networks in West Africa will likely continue efforts to plan explosive or mass casualty attacks, either within Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria



or southern Europe. ISIS-linked actors may take advantage of refugee flows from Libya into Italy as a means for launching such an attack.

In the Far Abroad, ISIS will likely conduct outreach to nations with sizeable Muslim populations in order to encourage mobilization and attacks. ISIS may announce the creation of a *wilayat* in the Caucasus over the course of Ramadan, possibly through an attack on Russian security forces in Chechnya. ISIS will likely also release propaganda messages aimed at China, Turkey, and Southeast Asian countries to gain recruits and to intimidate foreign governments. ISIS may even send emissaries to active jihadist groups in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In nations with relatively small Muslim populations, ISIS will likely encourage lone wolf attacks on military and police targets in order to inspire fear and encourage adversaries such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Australia to withdraw from Iraq.

### **ISIS'S MOST DANGEROUS COURSE OF ACTION (MDCOA): ISIS INITIATES A NEW CAMPAIGN TO SEIZE HISTORIC CALIPHATE CAPITALS, PROVOKE REGIONAL WAR, AND FORCE THE WEST TO END MILITARY ACTION**

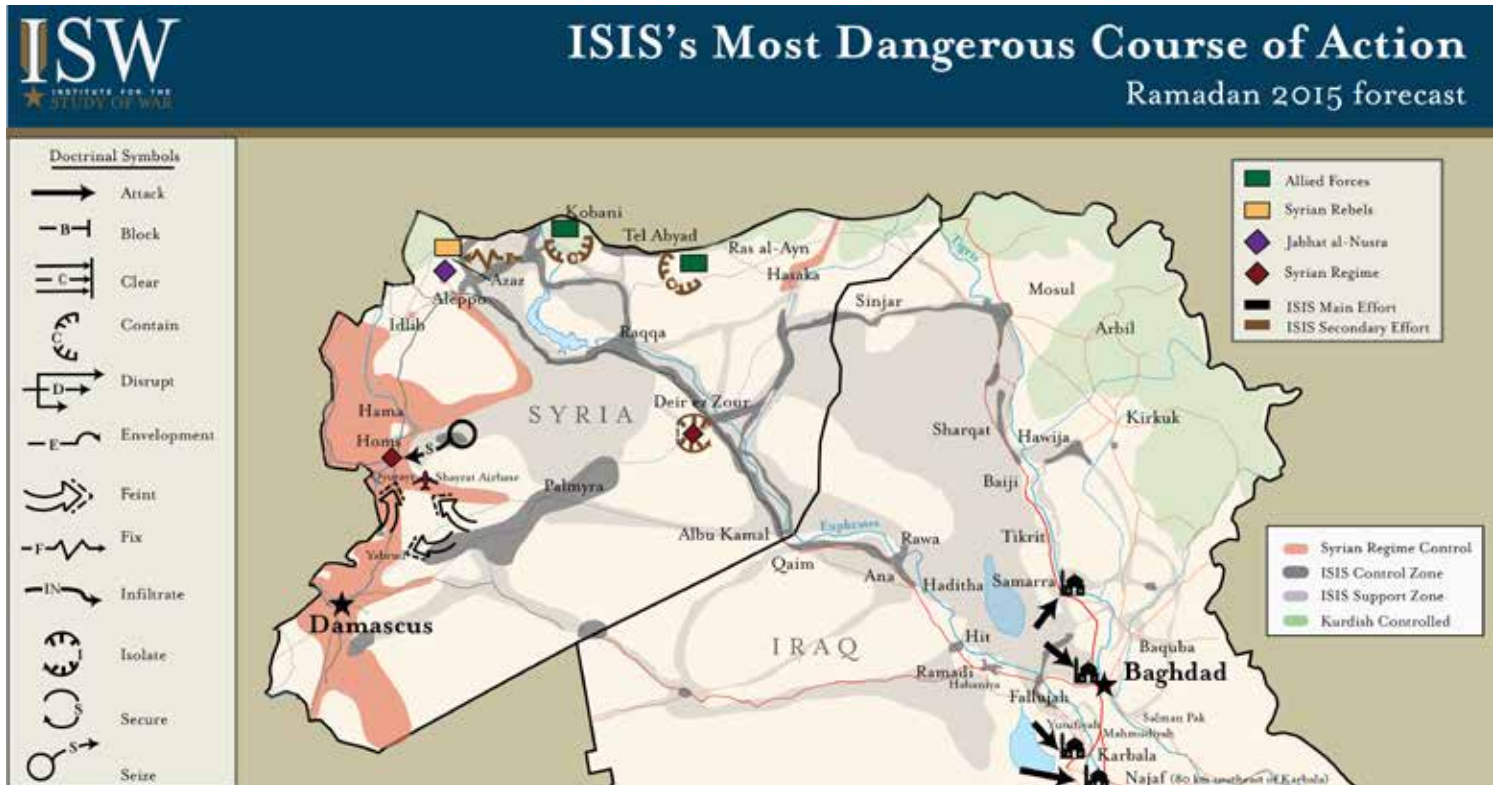
ISIS's most dangerous course of action in the next six weeks is a transition to a new phase in its campaign by escalating attacks against religious or political targets that alter the calculus of strong states in the region and abroad. It is possible that ISIS will mark its first anniversary as a caliphate by sowing seeds for regional disorder, marked with spectacular and surprise attacks upon targets that have hitherto been assessed by ISW to be outside the realm of likely action by ISIS. In particular, ISIS may attempt to spark a regional sectarian war, as indicators of this regional vulnerability are widely presenting in Syria and Yemen as Arab states and Iran confront one another. Actions may include attacks against Shi'a religious sites and actions against military sites with U.S. or Western allied personnel to cause them to end their involvement in the mid-term.

*Iraq Most Dangerous: ISIS Attacks Shi'a holy sites to spark regional sectarian war*

ISIS may attack Shi'a holy sites in Iraq in order to spark a regional sectarian war. When ISIS's predecessor, AQI attacked and destroyed the al-Askari mosque in Samarra in February 2006, it sparked a sectarian war in Iraq, a precedent that ISIS likely desires to repeat. An ISIS attack upon Samarra that damages the shrine will likely have cascading effects to increase sectarian violence in Iraq, or possibly more drastically to provoke an Iranian occupation that would stir escalatory responses from Arab states. An attempt by ISIS to control the city would likely precipitate the same outcome.

ISIS clearly intends to attack Samarra, likely in order to control it ultimately, as ISIS has held positions on all sides of the city over the course of the last year. Samarra also has a majority Sunni population despite its religious significance to Shi'a Muslims. ISIS would likely destroy the al-Askari shrine if it gains control of the city, a sure way for ISIS to ignite sectarian escalation. Security in Samarra is now highly controlled, however, and the ISF is augmented by numerous Shi'a militias as well as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) since the fall of Mosul. Protecting the al-Askari shrine is of paramount significance to the enemies of ISIS in Iraq, and they have succeeded in protecting the city from numerous attacks by ISIS since June 2015, including one attack that occurred several days before the fall of Mosul. Compared to the other shrines at Khadimiya in Baghdad, Karbala, and Najaf, it may be the hardest target for ISIS to penetrate.

ISIS may instead attempt to conduct spectacular attacks upon the other holy cities, particularly Karbala, which is proximate to ISIS's positions in eastern Anbar. An attack by ISIS in Karbala or Najaf could cause Iranian-backed militias and Iranian core assets to alter their disposition across Iraq to concentrate upon the defense of the shrines. This would give an inherent military benefit to ISIS in consolidating its core strength in northern and western Iraq. It would also likely spark sectarian violence across Baghdad, Diyala, Samarra, and the Baghdad Belts that would



generate the conditions of national disorder in Iraq that would allow ISIS to progress further.

*Iraq Most Dangerous (Alternative): ISIS attacks Baghdad from the interior to undermine the government's control*

ISIS desires to break the Iraqi state, and ISIS also likely desires to control Baghdad. Baghdad is a historic caliphate capital during an age of caliphate greatness, and the symbolism of a caliphate seat in Baghdad would resonate as part of the progression of the caliphate in ways that would appeal to ISIS's repeated use of Ramadan as a marker of strategic progress. Baghdad is also the seat of government of Iraq, and compromising security in the capital at a critical point for the measure of ISF recovery would likely accelerate Iraq's descent into permanent disorder. However, Baghdad also likely houses the greatest concentration of security forces in Iraq, making it the hardest and largest urban target in the country for ISIS to penetrate. ISIS can however create conditions inside Baghdad that puncture the security bubble of the capital and fundamentally threaten Baghdad as the seat of government and core defense of the state of Iraq against ISIS's occupation.

ISIS's military positions elsewhere in the country consistently form rings around the capital that showcase its central position within ISIS's military campaign. Its military campaign has focused upon Baghdad historically, and it was the principal attack zone that ISIS designated in 2013 while ISIS was attempting to spark a sectarian war in Iraq. The elevation of the threat of ISIS after June 2014 likely generated a security crackdown in the capital, which either deterred or obstructed ISIS's continued operations there in late 2014. ISIS's signature VBIED and IED attacks have begun to increase in recent months, indicating that ISIS still has freedom of maneuver in the capital, but this is likely an adaptation. ISIS has likely adapted to new security measures as well as new displaced populations, through which ISIS may have infiltrated Sunni areas of the capital. The threat of ISIS sleeper cells and ISF infiltration is high enough to make an ISIS plan to destabilize Baghdad in conjunction with Ramadan 2015 feasible.

ISIS will likely conduct spectacular attacks across Baghdad in conjunction with most other courses of action, but Baghdad may also be the main effort that ISIS will pursue during Ramadan. An attack by ISIS upon Baghdad would also require that ISIS neutralize



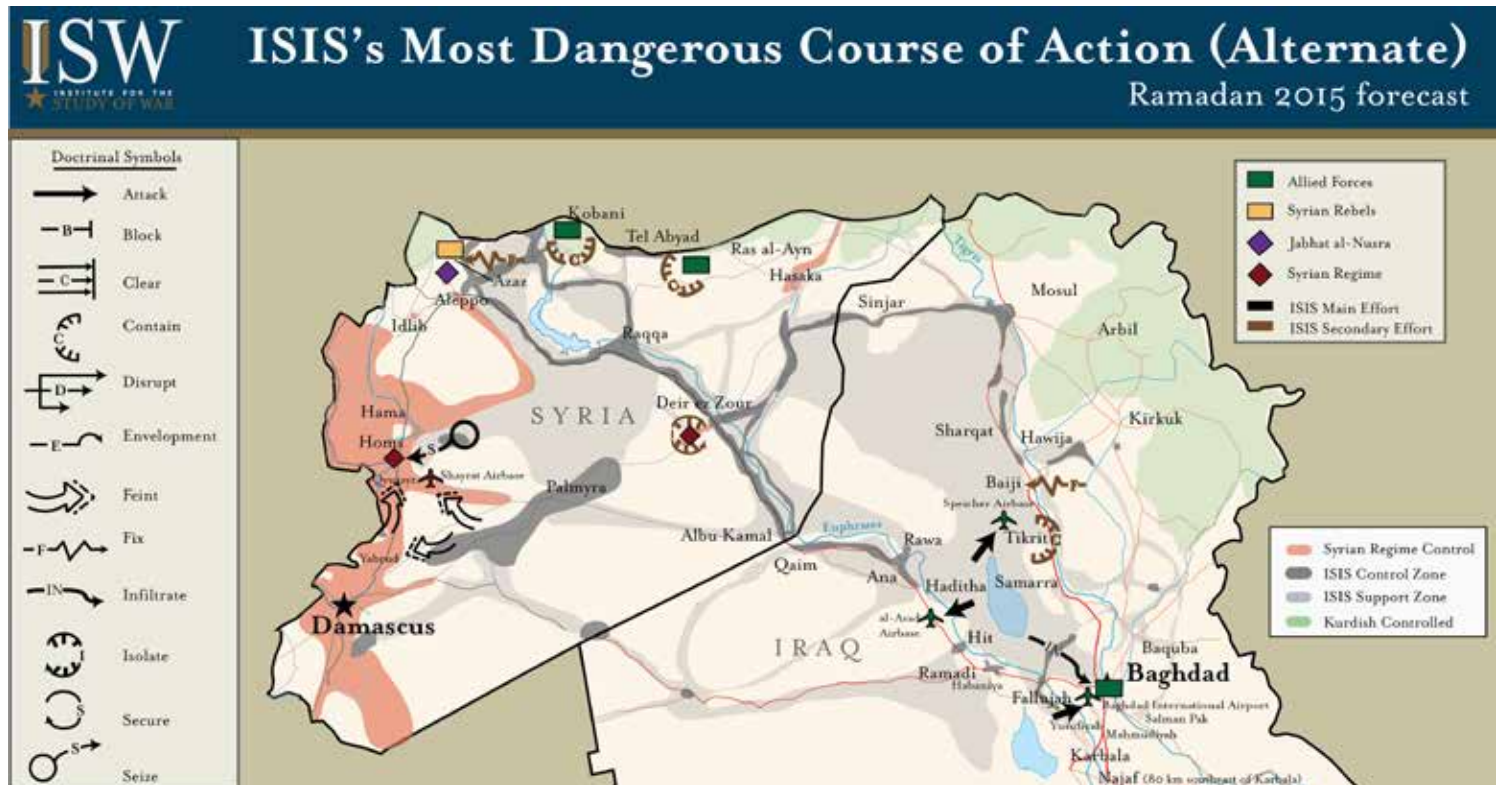
the strategic defensive bases around the capital, namely Baghdad International Airport, Taji Base, and Balad Airbase. ISIS may attack these bases to fix ISF reinforcements there, focusing upon low-level or spectacular attacks in the city to overwhelm the ISF and militias on the interior, or to spark civilian-on-civilian sectarian violence. Alternately, ISIS may attack these bases with the intent to overrun one or all of them, demonstrating the permanent dissolution of the ISF either by overrunning the headquarters of key ISF units like the CTS, or by eliminating airfields and key training bases. Baghdad would be exposed to further attacks by ISIS, and also to occupation by Iran and its proxies, if the state defense of the capital fails.

*Syria Most Dangerous: ISIS launches offensive to seize Homs City and force the Assad regime to contract*

ISIS's most dangerous course of action is to launch a major and immediate offensive operation to alter the course of the Syrian war in the near term and cause exponential damage to the Assad regime. One feasible way for ISIS to change ground conditions in the 2015 Ramadan period is to launch a major offensive to seize control of the regime-held provincial capital of Homs City, a vital logistical hub for the regime.

ISIS retains latent military capability in the Syrian-Lebanese border region south of the city that it could activate to launch feint attacks against key regime-held positions nearby, such as the towns of al-Qusayr and Yabrud and the Shayrat military airbase. Major attacks against these towns would likely provoke a considerable regime deployment to reinforce them, and ISIS could take advantage of this shift in the regime's military posture to deliver a major attack against Homs City itself. Such an offensive, if highly successful, could ultimately force the regime to abandon the most remote outposts of its 'army in all corners' strategy – such as Aleppo, Deir ez-Zour, and Hasaka – and contract into the core terrain of a rump Alawite state in a manner which would enable ISIS to direct its full combat power against al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups in northern and southern Syria.

Two indicators that ISIS is pursuing this course of action to defeat the Assad regime have already occurred in early 2015. ISIS increased its anti-regime rhetoric and imagery in early 2015, indicating that ISIS likely seeks to position itself as an anti-Assad actor in order to attract Syrian revolutionary groups to its ranks. Second, ISIS claimed credit for at least





two spectacular attacks targeting Alawite-majority neighborhoods in Homs City in 2015. In addition, the geography of ISIS control in central Syria makes this a feasible course of action. ISIS is currently unable to deploy directly westward against Homs from Palmyra because of a series of regime military bases on the Palmyra-Homs road. However, ISIS has reserve military capability in the northeastern Homs countryside that could mobilize to conduct a Homs City attack, bypassing the Palmyra-Homs City road altogether. This course of action would likely require ISIS to shift to a supporting effort in Deir ez-Zour, containing the Syrian regime on the western outskirts of the city rather than seizing that airbase.

This course of action is highly dangerous because it will likely cause exponential reverberations across other Syrian battle lines. Homs City has a large Alawite population, and ISIS is likely to conduct sectarian killings of the civilian population as a component of such an attack. A major threat to Homs City would likely prompt increased deployments of Iranian and Iranian-sponsored paramilitaries to the area, including Hezbollah reinforcements drawn from the Qalamoun border region, potentially opening avenues for Syrian rebels and Jabhat al-Nusra to attack Hezbollah on both sides of the Syrian-Lebanese border. Such activities could quickly escalate into sectarian clashes in the Bekaa Valley and greater Lebanon. ISIS gains in Homs City might also prompt more Syrian opposition fighters to align with ISIS and bolster its ranks due to the symbolic appeal ISIS would possess as the fighting force that effectively defeated the regime by capturing Homs, the 'capital of the Syrian revolution'. If ISIS's offensive succeeds in producing a regime contraction, ISIS, JN, and other Salafi-jihadist actors will assert near-total control over the vast majority of Syrian territory in an outcome damaging to any recovery of order in Syria, although those actors are likely to compete with one another violently for power and influence.

*Near Abroad Most Dangerous: ISIS supports or provokes regional sectarian war in the Near Abroad*

During Ramadan 2015 ISIS may seek to incite a broader sectarian conflict that implicates many states

and raises general levels of disorder. There are at least three ways that ISIS's affiliates in the Near Abroad might participate in this effort. ISIS may use its Near Abroad affiliates to support one of the most dangerous courses of action described for Iraq and Syria, namely, to incite Shi'a mobilization generally, or to provoke the Iranian or Saudi governments directly.

ISIS's affiliates in the Near Abroad are well positioned to support a sectarian course of action initiated in Iraq or Syria. Over the first half of 2015, ISIS's affiliates in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan increasingly targeted Shi'a civilians with brutal and explosive attacks in an attempt to foster sectarianism on a local level. These attacks accelerated the Yemeni civil war, increased tensions between the Saudi government and its Shi'a minority, and raised ISIS's profile in Afghanistan. If ISIS initiated a major sectarian effort such as a bid for Homs in Syria or a city containing a shrine in Iraq during Ramadan, its Near Abroad affiliates in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen and Afghanistan would likely continue their local campaigns in order to distract and split the Arab- and Iranian- led coalitions that would form as a result.

Alternatively ISIS's leadership may attempt to foster sectarian conflict directly through coordinated action by its regional wilayats. ISIS may pressure either populations or states in pursuit of this objective. For the former, ISIS may direct its forces in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and possibly Afghanistan to simultaneously and repeatedly target Shi'a civilians or religious sites with explosive or particularly brutal attacks, such as mass executions. ISIS's intent in this case would be to aggravate Shi'a populations in a way that encourages grassroots violent mobilization of Shi'a and Sunni groups in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and that pushes existing conflicts in Yemen and Afghanistan to become sectarian. Given the organization's longstanding sectarian extremism, these developments would allow ISIS's affiliates to recruit from localized insurgencies, gaining influence and strength that would help ISIS expand in the long term.

ISIS's affiliates could also work to provoke increased the mobilization of Saudi security forces in a way that threatens Iran and leads to overall regional escalation.

ISIS has several means of doing so. For example, it could direct its affiliates in Saudi Arabia to launch an explosive attack against a Saudi military target, which ISIS supporters reportedly unsuccessfully attempted in early 2015. Such an attack likely would cause Saudi Arabia to increase its domestic security and escalate its mobilization in Yemen. Iran would then likely accelerate its activities to counter Saudi action in Yemen and possibly in Syria, setting conditions for a regional sectarian war.

*Far Abroad Most Dangerous: ISIS conducts synchronized attacks in the Far Abroad*

ISIS may direct synchronized attacks in the Far Abroad, both in order to demonstrate its reach and capability, and to intimidate the West. Since September 2014 ISIS has released frequent calls for its supporters in the U.S., Europe, Canada and Australia to attempt domestic attacks on civilians and security forces. Lone wolf and small cell attempts accelerated in the months following the Paris attacks of January 2015, as ISIS's supporters observed the power of a single successful attack. Western nations increased domestic security measures in response, heightening surveillance efforts and in some cases deploying additional law enforcement. Because of these efforts, the majority of ISIS supporters' plots over the course of 2015 have been unsuccessful. Nevertheless it is very likely that ISIS's supporters will attempt additional attacks over the course of Ramadan, either as individuals or as two to three man cells.

A less likely but more dangerous scenario is possible. ISIS may direct its followers to conduct synchronized attacks across multiple countries in concert with Ramadan. This effort could be undertaken in addition to the MDCOAs described above, as it does not require significant resources from ISIS in its Interior or Near Abroad. The communication and coordination necessary for a synchronized multi-national attack raises the possibility for failure. However, ISIS benefits from successful and unsuccessful attacks alike, as the latter usually results in media attention and the propagation of fear.

The United Kingdom, France and Australia are

particularly vulnerable to a Far Abroad plot, because ISIS contains many foreign fighters from those countries who remain connected to their local networks. ISIS could possibly work through those foreign fighters to encourage and perhaps resource attacks in multiple countries on a single day. Plans that involve more participants, targets, and communication are more susceptible to detection, however, which is the largest obstacle to ISIS successfully executing a series of multinational attacks. For this reason a Ramadan Far Abroad attack plan would probably involve small arms attacks, rather than bombings, since the materiel necessary for the latter is easier to trace. The ISIS far abroad MDCOA might include an attack on the U.S. homeland, although ISW cannot ever assess such a plot as feasible on the basis of open sources.

## CONCLUSION

ISIS has several likely courses of action available that it may undertake over the course of Ramadan to continue pursuing its strategic objectives. Counter-ISIS forces are already arraying against some of the scenarios that are both likely and dangerous. U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq have focused airpower assets against ISIS attempted assaults on places such as Baghdad, near al-Asad airbase, likely in an attempt to prevent this likely action. Iraqi and Iranian-backed forces are active in Anbar and Salah ad-Din in an effort to reverse ISIS's recent gains and secure Baghdad and Samarra by actively engaging in the quadrant northwest of Baghdad. Reinforcements to the Assad regime, including Iranian and Iranian-backed proxy forces, have been reported in Damascus and Latakia, though ISW does not yet have multi-source reporting to substantiate these claims. If these reinforcements have indeed arrived, they will likely seek to stabilize the battlefield by conducting operations in Idlib province, recently seized by Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups, to keep pressure off the predominantly Alawite province of Latakia. They may launch attacks to gain depth in Damascus city and its outlying areas, they may reinforce defensive positions, or they may attempt to regain Palmyra. These actions and dispositions mitigate, but do not eliminate, the military actions ISIS is likely to attempt during Ramadan. In some cases, they actually open

up maneuver corridors for ISIS to pursue alternate objectives.

U.S. policymakers should recognize that ISIS is not yet defeated. Its most likely courses of action maintain the status quo in Iraq and Syria and set conditions for future operations there. Its most dangerous courses of action can exponentially change the dynamics of the Middle East and North Africa by prompting disproportionate or escalating responses by regional and global actors. This essay does not make specific military recommendations for U.S. forces to respond to ISIS's courses of action. Political leaders and military planners should consider temporary reinforcements, changes in rules of engagement, and allocation of additional resources to take advantage of predictable ISIS concentrations and targets of opportunity. If they do not, the month of Ramadan in 2015 is likely to be violent and see attempts at gains that will enhance ISIS's political as well as military objectives a year after it established its caliphate.

*Follow ISW on Twitter @theStudyofWar*

*Kimberly Kagan is the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War*

*Jessica Lewis McFate is the research director at the Institute for the Study of War*

*Jennifer Cafarella and Christopher Kozak are Syria analysts at the Institute for the Study of War*

*Theodore Bell is an Iraq analyst at the Institute for the Study of War*

*Harleen Gambhir is a counterterrorism analyst at the Institute for the Study of War*

## FOR FURTHER ISW ASSESSMENTS OF ISIS'S DISPOSITION AND CAPABILITIES:

[The ISIS Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy](#), by Jessica Lewis McFate

[The ISW ISIS Sanctuary Map](#), by the ISW Analytical Team

[Control of Terrain in Syria](#), by Jennifer Cafarella and Christopher Kozak

[ISIS Control and Expected Offensives in Central Syria](#), by Christopher Kozak and Jennifer Cafarella

[ISF Disposition in Anbar May 15-17](#), by Theodore Bell and Patrick Martin

[The ISIS Regional Strategy for Yemen and Saudi Arabia](#), by Harleen Gambhir

[The ISIS Global Intelligence Summary](#), March – May 2015, by Harleen Gambhir

[An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy for Syria](#), by Christopher Kozak

[Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda](#), by Jennifer Cafarella